
Romans: Gospel People

Midweek Bible Study

Week 6 - Romans 4:1-25 - Righteousness by faith from first to last



3:21-26 - The main point...

Martin Luther said of these verses,

“The chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.”

4 - Abraham

“our forefather according to the flesh”(v.1) - Abraham was the father of Israel, and not only Israel but was to be father of many nations as God had promised (Genesis 17:4)

Isaiah 51:1-2

“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness
and who seek the Lord:
Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry from which you were hewn;

look to Abraham, your father,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was only one man,
and I blessed him and made him many.”

Popular Jewish thought regarding Abraham (apocryphal):

“Abraham was perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favour by his righteousness throughout his life.” (Jubilees 23:10)

“was not Abraham found faithful in temptation and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness?” (1 Maccabees 2:52)

(Paul was arguing against the above ways of thinking about Abraham)

4 key episodes from Abraham's life

1. God called Abraham to leave his home and people in Ur and promised to show him another land and give him an amazing legacy of numerous descendants and to bless all peoples on earth through him. (Gen. 11:27; 12:1)
2. God made these promises more specific identifying the land as Canaan and declaring that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky. It was by believing this last promise that Abraham was justified. (Gen. 13:14; 14:16; 15:5; 15:6)
3. When Abraham was 99 and Sarah 90, God confirmed the promise of a son, changing his name from Abram to Abraham. He was to be father of many nations and God gave him circumcision as the sign of the covenant. (Gen. 17:1,17)
4. God tested Abraham asking him to sacrifice Isaac, the child of the promise, and through Abraham's willingness, God re-confirmed his covenant. (Gen 22:1)

Suggested structure for chapter 4 (John Stott)

Verses 1-8 affirm that boasting is excluded (3:27) demonstrating that Abraham was not justified by works.

Verses 9-12 affirm that circumcision makes no difference (3:29) by saying that Abraham was not justified by circumcision.

Verses 13-17 affirm that justification comes apart from the law (3:31) by saying Abraham was not justified by the law.

Finally verses 17-25 concern Abraham's justification by faith and conclude by linking Abraham's faith with our own.

4:1-8 - boasting is excluded - Abraham was not justified by works

Ecclesiastes 5:2

“Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”

Isaiah 6:5

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

4:3 - What does the scripture say?

Genesis 15:5-6

[God] took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”
Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

‘credited’ - gk. *logizomai* - word used in the keeping of accounts, also translated ‘reckoned’

4:4 - Wages or gift?

‘obligation’ - gk. *opheilema* - also ‘according to debt’

‘gift’ - gk. *charis* - also ‘grace’

4:6-8 - David

Quote from Psalam 32:1-2

(v.8) - ‘count against’ - gk. *logisētai* - also ‘reckon against’, ‘impute’

Hodge:

“To impute sin is to lay sin to the charge of anyone and to treat him accordingly... to impute righteousness is to set righteousness to one’s account and to treat him accordingly.”

John Stott:

“Thus Paul writes in Romans 4 both of God not imputing sin to sinners, although it actually belongs to them, and of his imputing righteousness to us, although it does not belong to us”

At the cross, Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us and our sin is imputed to Christ. Hence, 2 Corinthians 5:21,

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

4:9-12 - Abraham was not justified by circumcision

Gen. 15 - Abraham’s justification ————— Gen. 17 - Abraham’s circumcision
At least 14 years

4:11 - Circumcision: A sign and a seal

Genesis 17:11,

“You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.”

Colossians 2:11-12,

“In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh[b] was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Galatians 3:26-29,

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Heidelberg catechism:

69. How is it signified and sealed to you in Holy Baptism, that you have part in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross?

Thus: that Christ instituted this outward washing with water and joined therewith this promise: that I am washed with His blood and Spirit from the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as certainly as I am washed outwardly with water, whereby commonly the filthiness of the body is taken away.

4:13-17 - Abraham was not justified by the law

“heir of the world” (v.13)

1 Corinthians 3:21-23,

“So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas[c] or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”

Romans 8:17,

“Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”

4:16 - by grace alone

(v.16) grace - gk. *charis*

John Stott,

“Faith’s exclusive function is to humbly receive what grace offers. Otherwise ‘grace would no longer be grace’ (11:6)”

...

“God’s law makes demands which we transgress and so we incur wrath (15); God’s grace makes promises which we believe, and so we receive blessing (14, 16). Thus law, obedience, transgression and wrath belong to one category of thinking, while grace, promise, faith and blessing belong to another.”

4:17 - The power of God...

God is the God of creation and new creation, resurrection.

“...the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.”

Questions for discussion

Why is justification by faith good news?

Do you ever feel insecure in your faith? If so, why? How does Abraham’s story help you?

Do you think it is possible for someone to lose their salvation?

What are the parallels between circumcision and baptism? What would you say to an unbaptised believer who did not think they need to be baptised?

In what ways do we have an advantage over Abraham where faith is concerned?

Verses 19 to 20 speak about faith being strengthened. How can our faith grow?

Why do you trust God?